

***Rimi Nandy¹ and
Santosh Kumar²
Whose Narrative?
Political
Counternarratives
and Citizen
Gaslighting on
Social Media***

About the author

School of Liberal Arts and Culture Studies, Adamas University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

¹ rimi.nandy@adamasuniversity.ac.in,

² kumar29466@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

This paper proposes the study of ‘gaslight’ narratives spread across various social media plat-forms, with respect to Indian political circumstances in the present context. With the increasing number of Covid-related deaths, there is a sudden movement towards sharing posts consisting of memes, news reports and videos criticizing the role of the government in fighting the crisis arising from the spread of the coronavirus. This is mostly featured on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. The presence of a counternarrative discrediting the criticism through the means of #positivity can be considered a form of gaslighting of citizens. The construction of such counternarratives features the use of mind manipulation similar to the practice of psychological gaslighting. The prevalence of fake news further plays an important role with respect to trans-media gaslighting in social media. The paper seeks to analyze status updates to understand the method of mind manipulation to create an illusionary truth in the eyes of various social media users.

Keywords

gaslighting, post-truth, social media, affective, algorithm

1 Introduction

The post-truth era negates the importance of truth value in the dissemination of information. This has increasingly influenced the practice of political activities. Truth is no longer relevant in shaping public opinion. The focal point of “post-truth” is its access to human emotions in place of reasoning. The vanishing distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘opinion’ is greatly influenced by a shift towards centralization of affective components. The manner in which human emotions interact with information goes a long

created through a process of co-creation, where the communicator is always working towards providing information which is expected to satisfy the ideas and beliefs of the users. The newsfeed of a social media profile caters to the expectations of the user, thereby creating a kind of ‘echo chamber’ which resonates similar ideas by means of various updates provided. According to Laura Galante, a cyberspace analyst, “our realities are increasingly based on the information that we’re consuming at the palm of our hand, and from the news feeds that we’re scanning, and the hashtags and stories that we

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way in the construction of post-truth narratives. Post-truth has existed since time immemorial, from Galileo’s execution to Hitler’s politics of Aryan superiority. It has become more reinforced in the present age and time due to the availability of social media.

Digital space has broken down various differentiating boundaries to blur the real and the virtual, truth and falsehood and the public and the private. All of these distinguishing factors pertaining to an individual’s social life have morphed into multiple truths and identities. The modern age introduced the concepts of consumerism and performativity. The post-modern age further breaks down into different compartments of hybridization and conglomeration. The single identity is multiplied to perform multiple identities. The real self is no longer relevant.

The birth of social media has created a space which enables the construction and propagation of post-truth. The inner working of social media platforms based on algorithms is one of the major elements behind transforming these platforms into compartments of similar viewpoints. Post-truth does not refer to the passive reception of information by users. Instead, it is the coming together of the communicators and the audience. According to Marcinkowski, post-truth is closely related to the “primacy of anticipation over content” [1]. Post-truth is

see trending” [2]. This creates an effect on the users, termed as the “illusory truth effect”. This term is used to describe a phenomenon which leads people to believe information to be true if it is repeated very often. Since the algorithms repeatedly feature information which is connected to a user’s belief and value system, it appears to be true. This faith in the information is not based on its verifiability but rather on the willingness to believe in the information as it is more self-gratifying. The information coupled with positive comments and repeated shares creates a sense of truth value which is entirely illusory. The illusory truth effect can be considered a form of gaslighting, which is also based on repetition of actions or phrases.

The very identity of politics has also changed due to the emergence of the social media sphere. The participatory democracy that Hannah Arendt talks about is also affected by the epistemic bubbles formed by personalization and spectacularisation of politics. A single truth does not allow the presence of multiple opinions. According to Arendt, a political space is a space of political conflicts through which the correct decision is reached. However, this form of politics is most often considered to be a utopian concept of politics. Since politics in the present age is greatly dependent on spectacle, the element of truth within the political sphere becomes redundant. Politics as a performance necessitates a populist leader who uses some

form of lying. In the words of Arendt, “Since the liar is free to fashion his ‘facts’ to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the user expectations of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller” [3, p. 25]. As the quantity of information becomes more important than the quality, it therefore becomes easier to use manipulated truth to cater to the increasing demands for information. This makes it less challenging for political parties and political figures to ‘gaslight’ citizens into believing their version of the truth.

1.1 Tracing the course of ‘gaslight’

The gaslight phenomenon first found its way into illness discourse through its representation in the movie *Gaslight*. Initially restricted to the power dynamics within domestic space, it has now crossed over to political discussion within public forums. One of the triggering factors behind the spread of the gaslight phenomenon is the birth of a ‘networked’ society. First thematised in the 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton, the gaslight became emblematic of British Victorian society. A marker of the Victorian household, it evokes a time when the use of gaslights was commonly seen in the form of streetlights and interior light fixtures. The play was later adapted into a film in the year 1944. George Curok, the director of the movie adaptation of *Gaslight*, popularized the term “to gaslight” in order to refer to the psychological manipulation of the wife by the husband. The movie acquired its name from the flickering of the gaslights inside the house when the husband searched for his wife’s aunt’s jewelry in the attic. Switching on the gaslights in the attic disturbed their glow in the other rooms, which made the wife suspect that the attic lights were being switched on. However, the husband covered up the truth by making his wife believe that she was losing her sanity. In the hands of patriarchy, women have been clinically considered to be hysterical and insane.

The psychological manipulation practiced by patriarchy to destabilize women was later adopted by the Nazi regime to practice mass manipulation of the citizens of Germany. In this respect, the term “big lies” became essential. The concept of “big lies” was used to bait the

inherent fear in the mind of the masses. In the words of Richard Evans, “If you subject people to a barrage of lies, in the end they’ll begin to think well maybe they’re not all true, but there must be something in it” [4].

The term ‘gaslighting’ has been repurposed in recent years to describe Donald Trump’s use of false accusations targeting the emotions of his followers in order to strengthen his position in the American political scene. The idea of post-truth and ‘gaslighting’ is intrinsically linked with the construction of a fictional other. This created discrimination between ‘us’ and ‘them’ fortifies the position of post-truth. With the increasing disillusionment regarding traditional forms of politics and democracy, there has been a shift towards enactment of partisan politics.

2 Theoretical background: post-truth and networked society

The rise of networks transformed digital space by recreating the manner in which human interaction and connections are built. In the words of Papacharissi, social media offer a rich “performative palette”, which can be used by individuals to not only express themselves but also perform their ideas, ideologies and beliefs [5, p. 1]. Devoid of geographical borders, a network can connect any person to another, irrespective of distance, time and boundaries. A major impact of the emerging social network spaces is the blurring of public and private spaces. Instead of clearly distinguishable public and private spaces, what has resulted out of the digital sphere is a social space. Social media spaces such as Facebook have become an amalgamation of various spheres of life. This is not only restricted to social practices but political practices as well. Like any other dissolving boundaries brought about by the postmodern age, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between the social and the political. In the words of Hannah Arendt, the political realm is a “web of relation” formed by individuals coming together to perform political actions [6, p. 16]. This is in line with the spaces provided by social media. However, these spaces are not entirely restricted to the discussion of political issues alone. Instead, most often the political is discussed through social experiences. There-

fore, the idea of space and its relation to politics is greatly problematized.

Social media has also changed the manner in which information is created and consumed. Bruns uses the term ‘produsage’ to refer to the user-generated content pertaining to news feeds [7]. One of the important elements used on Twitter to write microblogs of 140 characters is the hashtag. Hashtags are used to categorize content into different units. These units of information are “a mix of reports, opinions about, and general affective reactions to news of social and informational relevance” [7, p. 34]. The affective capacity of information is intrinsically linked to the concept of post-truth. Affect refers “to the ability to affect and be affected” [7, p. 13]. In keeping with the role of affectivity, a space is created for the growth of fake news. The term fake news does not refer to lies or

tion is no longer relevant. On a social media platform, anybody can be a journalist or critic. The lines between facts and opinions have been blurred. Since post-truth is more in line with emotional response, most often opinions are mistaken for truth. The social perception of truth has been transformed. Therefore, the practice of politics has also undergone a marked change in its perception, attitude and nature.

2.1 Politics and spectacle in the post-truth era

Guy Debord, in his *Society of Spectacle*, theorizes about ‘spectacle’. He believed that life in modern society, influenced by the capitalist economy, moved away from living to representation. The term ‘spectacle’ in this respect represents the social relations of people which are experienced through a mediated form. The

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false news. Rather it is a tool used to create alternate truths. Due to the ease with which content can be created and disseminated, fake news has become rampant within the social media circle. A crisis situation increases the demand for information among the masses. This creates a space which is then exploited by propagating fake news. In a time where there is a dearth of information, it is easier to pass off fake news as truth [8, p. 7]. The increasing impact of social networks on society can be clearly seen in the manner in which truth functions within the sphere of political democracy. The narratives created using ‘disinformation’ prove that rational discourses are being replaced with emotional effects. This has created a “bubble democracy”. The social network algorithms have created ‘echo chambers’ where a user comes across viewpoints in line with his/her viewpoints. As such, the masses never come in contact with alternative viewpoints, thereby creating a form of democracy based on homogeneity of thoughts. Social media, which launched Web 2.0, resulted in the democratization of voices. Specializa-

tion impact of consumerism can also be felt with respect to political practices. Debord is of the opinion that ‘spectacle’ is merely a tool in the hands of capitalists “for distracting and pacifying the masses” [9]. Due to the development of a capitalist consumer culture, the representation has become more essential than the real. This has further affected the concept of political actions. Politics is now increasingly associated with the idea of theatricality. According to Bernard Stiegler, people enacting democracy has been transformed into the audience enacting democracy [10, pp. 133-148]. Donald Trump manipulating the data regarding the number of attendees at his political rally is an example of how slight alterations to factual truth do not dissuade his followers from believing his version of the truth.

The birth of the postmodern age displaced the idea of a grand narrative. It has been replaced by the presence of multiple truths. The demarcations between truth and untruth, real and unreal have been removed with the advent of

postmodern thoughts and ideals. Digital space is no longer restricted to just calculating data to achieve a result. Instead, towards the beginning of the new millennium, with the advent of social media, the role of digital space shifted towards that of interaction. In the words of Michael Wiberg, what was created in the process is an “interaction society” [11, p. 1]. Social interactivity becomes the focus of Web 2.0. The nature of politics also undergoes a major change within the Web 2.0 environment. Following Hannah Arendt’s understanding, politics is based around conflict. The political realm is the space where people gather to undertake political debates. Democracy originates from the plurality of opinions. Without conflicting opinions, democracy becomes irrelevant along with the very idea of politics. One of the major characteristics

or information manipulation. What is important in the post-truth age is how information is used to affect the emotions of the masses. Post-truth is not equivalent to lies. Instead, it brings forth the availability of alternative points of view. The unverified information available on social media acts as an alternative truth. The masses “have never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions, and cannot do without them. They constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real; they are almost as strongly influenced by what is untrue as by what is true. They have an evident tendency not to distinguish between the two” [12, pp. 19-20]. Both McCarthyism and Trumpism are based on the ‘paranoid-style’ politics of the post-truth era. Social media platforms have reinforced the practice of post-truth politics, as they have enabled easier dissemination

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of social media is the idea of personalization. The ability to personalize one’s profile allows a social media user to surround himself/herself with people of a similar mindset. This creates the absence of conflict. Social media filters are entirely based on the idea of ‘homophily’. This feature of social media platforms transforms the very concept of politics and democracy. The ‘filter bubbles’ resulting from the practice of customization and personalization have created a favourable condition for the flourishing of post-truth. The ‘post’ in ‘post-truth’ refers to an age where verifiable facts have been substituted by the belief in opinion. It refers to the irrelevance of truth. The rise in commercialization has led to the birth of a society of spectacle. The advancement in digital and information technology also plays a major role in paving the way for the strong foothold of post-truth. These reasons coupled with an increasing economic crisis and distrust of political figures has created a space for the development of disinformation

of curated information. These platforms provide access to unchecked information fortifying one’s socio-political viewpoints. This enables the formation of a community of supporters who work towards building a fictional reality for strengthening a political position. The 2016 American presidential election created a platform for the recurrence of the term ‘gaslighting’ in the political context. As a tool of psychological manipulation, gaslighting is not entirely based on lies; rather, it focuses on creating ‘alternative facts’, thereby creating a confused truth. The main function of political gaslighting is to discredit expert opinions and facts. The act of using “alternative truth” is seen as a revolt against the establishment. It gains its strength from acting as a tool for overthrowing the establishment built by technocratic intellectuals. Trump’s use of blatant lies to perform before his followers an alternative viewpoint creates a “cacophonous dissonance”. Politicians of the present age feed on the psychology of groups. As a result, the

‘gaslighting’ strategy is used to negate the presence of a single truth, instead creating a chaos of multiple truths to break the bounds between the true and the false.

The declining faith in traditional forms of politics and, to a greater extent, in liberal democracy has seen global shift towards right-wing politics. The spread of corruption and scandals has led to declining trust in the perceived truth of authority representing the interests of the common people. The rise of right-wing authoritarianism is based on the failing trust of the public in the “authority”. The notion of corrupted liberal elites disguising their private interests in the garb of liberalism has been greatly exploited by popular culture through the entertainment industry, fragmenting any sense of social reality.

3 Indian politics and political ‘gaslighting’ in the time of Covid: a case study

“Imagine a world that considers knowledge to be ‘elitist’. Imagine a world in which it is not medical knowledge but a free-for-all opinion market on Twitter that determines whether a newly emergent strain of avian flu is really contagious to humans. This dystopian future is still just that – a possible future” [13, p. 3]. This quote beautifully sums up the ‘infodemic’ which has accompanied the global pandemic of COVID-19. The amount of information which is regularly generated and consumed by users of social media creates a great influx of data which can be overpowering. When being bombarded by information, it becomes difficult to verify the truth element in all available information. The concept of truth has also been transformed in the age of the net-worked public.

A similar pattern can be observed by analyzing social media posts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter countering any form of criticism against the Indian government. A passive analysis method was followed to study posts related to COVID-19 and the Indian government’s role in handling the crisis. For this purpose, the Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages of MyGovIndia were studied in detail to understand the inter-action between the government and

citizens in online political spaces. The social media sphere has been effectively exploited by the Modi administration to sway public opinion in favour of the present government. Growing criticism of the failure of the Indian government in containing the spread of Covid in India is countered by discrediting such claims with statistics in favour of the government. Post-truth survives on presenting alternative truths, and statistics is one of its most essential tools.

Computer-mediated communication ascertains the practices of new media forms. New media essentially provides different multimedia tools for successful expression of thoughts, ideas and representation. Images have become crucial in the sphere of representation on social media. Social media provides a space which could be considered a hybrid of Habermas’s public sphere and Arendt’s political realm. This space at the same time becomes a boundaryless space for engaging in private and public inter-action, including political discussions. The study of diseases has shown how politics becomes intertwined with the body. The stigma connected to physical presence is in-grained in the bodies of the dead or the suffering.

In keeping with Debord’s idea of the spectacle, advertisement plays a crucial role in the political engagement with the ‘audience’. The idea of ‘image making’ is one of the most important goals of political party advertisements. A few select examples from the MyGovIndia Facebook page have been used to show how such political advertisements are molding the reaction of citizens in favour of the government. As this page is used for representing the face of the government to the citizens, it becomes a repository of the attitude of the government towards the irrelevance of truth value. This shows the importance of the effect a piece of information has on readers in place of its truth value.

The images used in the MyGovIndia pages across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are directed towards creating a counternarrative to the voices of criticism and dissention. The most common images shared across these platforms are of comparative statistics showing the percentage of vaccinations completed in different countries. The aim of these posters is to uphold

before the citizens how India has successfully implemented a higher percentage of dosages compared to developed countries like the USA and the UK among many others. The information provided through such statistics is not entirely false. However, the truth is manipulated to represent the number of dosages administered, not taking into account the major disparity in the population figures between India and the developed countries. This is where the impact of political gas-lighting can be observed with reference to the use of post-truth. A counternarrative is also seen in the comments on such posters. One of the comments says: “This is not fast in reality because population is different.”

Another image posted on Instagram shows a comparison between India, Canada, Italy, France, the USA and Germany. As per the statistics shown, India has successfully administered

lack of oxygen during the COVID-19 crisis. The user shared the news article with the caption “its 100% true, believe it, else u r “ANTI-INDIAN”” [14].

The partisan politics implemented in the present political milieu is evident in the responses to criticism of the Indian government. The construction of the invisible ‘other’ entwined with conspiracy theories is used to manipulate citizens into believing alter-native truths used to discredit criticism.

The posts updated in the MyGovIndia pages of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter cater to the politics of spectacle. The mediated reasoning of the ruling party uses the spectacle to divert the attention to non-issues. This has been observed in other democratic nations as well. The lived experience when mediated through social me-

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the 1st dosage among 93% of the 18+ population. In response to this image, a few comments ask why China has not been included, since with respect to population, China is nearer to India.

Images and videos of Covid deaths in India were circulated on Facebook. These videos were mostly taken from Reuters and CNN. The videos showed the inhuman conditions inside Covid hospitals, patients lying on the floor due to lack of hospital beds, death due to lack of oxygen. The critical attitude towards the crisis situation is negated by certain supporters of the government. In a comment, a person says: “What a biased media coverage by Reuters, So much good efforts by govt. not given any coverage...only negative image of India is presented before the world” [14].

A Facebook user shared a report by the Times of India based on the Uttar Pradesh government’s claim that no deaths occurred due to

dia platforms transforms opinions into alternative truths and discredits facts by terming them as ‘fake news’ or as ‘conspiracies’.

A news article shared on the Reuters Facebook page reports on a cow drinking event organized by a Hindu group. In one of the comments, a user responds by saying that “this channel covers only such type news to project India in a poor light in internationally 120cr out of 140cr people in India are uneducated/half educated & all have different level of understanding. This channel may be funded by foreign agencies to run such campaigns” [15].

Therefore, the statistics provided are biased towards India. Apart from the biased representation that can be observed in the MyGovIndia pages of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, the responses to comments in the form of words, likes, and emoticons indicate how the users are practicing their beliefs based on their encounter

with content catering to their form of personalization. The silofication of information through the use of search filters further complicates the process of verification. The exposure to similar viewpoints further concretizes preconceived biases. In the words of Eli Pariser, “the internet can cut people off from opposing views not because it enables people to join insular communities and customize away opposing views but because some of the biggest websites are automatically filtering away content we may not like behind the scenes” [16, p. 110].

4 Conclusion

Social media platforms are being used by the present Indian administration to counter criticism through denial and discrediting claims of opposing viewpoints. The ‘demonization’ of the political opponent by resorting to divisive politics further accentuates the prevalence of post-truth politics. There appears to be an indifference among citizens created by the ‘epistemic bubble’. The presence of such secluded spaces reduces the desire of an individual to access

spaces of conflict which might bring forth opposing viewpoints. This can be observed through the analysis of various social media pages which have been created in support of the government. Supporters sharing a similar fear of the ‘other’ readily contribute towards discrediting words from the opposition. It can be observed that the counterattacks are mostly based on ‘affective’ value rather than the truth value of information. The significance of the posts shared on platforms showcasing the role of the government during the Covid crisis is a very recent phenomenon. There has not been any significant work contextualized within the COVID-19 crisis. This makes the study important in understanding the changing attitude of society towards truth value and in analyzing the role of social media in such instances. A further study could be conducted using sentiment analysis and text analysis of social media posts of both supporters and the opposition for a comparative study of the differing attitudes of the two in the post-truth era. This would further help in understanding the extent of the influence of political gaslighting in the Indian political scene.

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